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# Game of text: Bruce Lee's media legacies

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/gch](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/gch)**Paul Bowman** 

Cardiff University, UK

## Abstract

This article situates Bruce Lee at the heart of the emergence of 'martial arts'. It argues that the notion 'martial arts', as we now know it, is a discursive entity that emerged in the wake of media texts, and that the influence of Bruce Lee films of the early 1970s was both *seminal and structuring* of 'martial arts', in ways that continue to be felt. Using the media theory proposition that a limited range of 'key visuals' structure the aesthetic terrain of the discursive entity 'martial arts', the article assesses the place, role and status of images of Bruce Lee as they work intertextually across a wide range of media texts. In so doing, the article demonstrates the enduring media legacy of Bruce Lee – one that has always overflowed the media realm and influenced the lived, embodied lifestyles of innumerable people the world over, who have seen Bruce Lee and other martial arts texts and gone on to study Chinese and Asian martial arts because of them.

## Keywords

Bruce Lee, discourse, discursive entity, martial arts, media legacy

## Introduction: the origin of martial arts

The term 'martial arts' is so familiar to us that we barely notice that it is a misnomer. For, rather than to the arts, skills and techniques of the military battlefield, we tend to use the term 'martial arts' today to refer to self-defence, sport, health-focused physical and existential practices, or individual, civilian, armed or unarmed combat training, rituals, formalisations, gameplay or exercises (Chouinard, 2016; Jaquet, 2018; O'Shea, 2018a, 2018b; Wetzler, 2015, 2018).

Another curiosity is that the term is also heavily associated with the idea of Asia. This association is regarded as an unjustifiable mistake by some, who point to the abundant evidence that military, paramilitary and civilian combat training practices have existed historically across almost all geographical regions (Wetzler, 2017). Examples include historical European

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## Corresponding author:

Paul Bowman, Cardiff University, Two Central Square, Cardiff, CF10 1FS, UK.

Email: [BowmanP@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:BowmanP@cardiff.ac.uk)

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martial arts (Burkart, 2016), Victorian and Edwardian urban martial arts (Godfrey, 2010), Afro-Brazilian martial arts (Assunção, 2005), postmodern martial arts (Jennings, 2016; Judkins, 2018), contemporary military-inspired fighting systems and so on. Nonetheless, in many contexts, the ‘mistake’ endures, with people tending to read the term ‘martial arts’ as most likely signifying *Asian* martial arts.

Informed by research into archives of anglophone film, media, press and books, my argument is that the supposed category mistake of regarding martial arts as carrying connotations of East Asia is a situation that continues to exist because the popularisation of the term martial arts occurred at the moment of – and entirely because of – the media-driven ‘kung fu craze’ that took off internationally in 1973. The form, content and orientation of this ‘big bang’ produced enduring structuring effects on the meanings and conceptualisations of the discursive entity or constellation that it produced. It has taken decades to even begin to displace this ‘original meaning’ in popular discourse. On the crest of this wave is the image of one figure, standing as the exemplary, paradigmatic and unsurpassable figure of the martial artist: Bruce Lee (Bowman, 2010, 2013; Chouinard, 2016).

Of course, this argument involves two controversial claims. The first is that the ‘origin’ of the contemporary term martial arts is to be found neither in the mists of ancient time, nor in military (martial) practices proper, nor simply in Asia. (The term really takes off after Bruce Lee’s 1973 *Hollywood* film, *Enter the Dragon*.) Doubtless, such a claim will disturb many historians (Lorge, 2012; Shahar, 2008; Wetzler, 2017). Indeed, this will be exponentially increased by the second claim of my argument, which is that the origin of ‘martial arts’ is located in cinematic and television texts of the early 1970s.

However, to be as clear as possible, my point is this: of course the English language has always allowed the combination of the word ‘martial’ with the word ‘arts’, and we know that the term has at different historical periods been used to refer to (often European) battlefield skills; yet it only emerged as a widely used and collectively meaningful entity in international popular consciousness and everyday life in the early 1970s. This renaissance was driven by a new set of themes that had entered the anglophone TV and film environment, ostensibly coming from Asia but effectively often really coming from America, all based on the aestheticisation and dramatisation of Asian martial arts.

## Critiquing the claim

As noted, there is a movement among professional and amateur historians to point out, challenge and reject the cultural assumption that ‘martial arts’ has the silent prefix ‘Asian’ (Wetzler, 2017). This is because to prioritise Asian martial arts seems like an illegitimate semantic and semiotic coup when one considers the sheer range of martial practices that have existed and continue to exist in multiple cultures and societies around the world (Green & Svinth, 2010). Such critics argue that the term martial arts could and should be applied to any of the many traditions of combat training that have always existed all over the world, independent of any connection to Asia.

Certainly, this is not to be disputed. Moreover, my intention is not to claim that the hand-to-hand combat traditions of Asia have *historical* priority over those of other cultures, societies or geographical regions. (This would be an argument for archaeologists and ancient historians to adjudicate.) Nor is it to claim that the combat traditions of Asia have *conceptual* or *cultural* priority over others (which would be a matter determined by how one allocates *value*). Nor is it even to claim that no one was training in Asian or other martial arts in the West before the explosion of the ‘kung fu craze’ of 1973. (This is demonstrably not the case.)

However, it is to suggest two things. First, that before the 1970s, even when practising jujutsu, judo, karate or kung fu, practitioners may not have been using or foregrounding the term ‘martial arts’ in relation to conceptualising their practice. The term ‘martial arts’ was in use before the 1970s (see, for example, Harvey, 1967), but it is surely significant that even the most prominent and respected of ‘serious’ martial arts researchers, such as D. F. Draeger (1974a, 1974b, 1975), were not using the term ‘martial arts’ prominently, or in any of their book or article titles, before 1973. Second, in mainstream cultural discourse, the term ‘martial arts’ was not *widely* in use at all (Chouinard, 2016). To use the terms of cultural and discourse theory: it was not yet a *discursive entity*.

In short, my argument is simply that all available evidence suggests that there was a discursive boom in the use of the term, accompanied by an explosion of interest, awareness and activity, as registered by the enormously increased frequency of occurrence of the term ‘martial arts’ across media and culture from the early 1970s – especially 1973 – onwards. Furthermore, my claim about this historical conjuncture is double. On one hand, my argument is that the uptake of Asian and other martial or combative practices was *media-driven*. So, on the other hand, or phrased differently for emphasis and clarity, although it was *media-driven* it was not ‘merely’ a *media-phenomenon*. Rather, the discursive entity ‘martial arts’ *overflowed* the media/representational realm and intervened directly into embodied, physical, social and cultural life. Put simply, it was from this moment on that uncountable and unquantifiable floods of people around the world rushed to take up the formal and informal study of practices that became in that moment generically known as ‘martial arts’ (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC] 4, 2013; BBC Radio 4, 2012).

Martial arts may have initially been a media spectacle; but the images intervened into other realms and contexts, captured desires, transformed minds and bodies (Spatz, 2015), altered lived identities, and changed cultures, the world over (Bowman, 2010; Farrer & Whalen-Bridge, 2011). ‘Martial arts’ is a discursive entity that produced not just *ideas and images* but also living, breathing, training, disciplined, embodied identities.

I am emphasising the *historical fact* of early 1970s media culture as the most significant ‘originary moment’ of the discursive entity ‘martial arts’ because if scholars do not acknowledge its significance and effects, then even the most scrupulous of historically informed perspectives on martial arts history will at best be only partially right. Even the historian must not overlook the fact that the term ‘martial arts’ emerged internationally in and through the appearance of ostensibly *Asian* martial arts on international *screens* (Bowman, 2014; Trausch, 2018b). In this sense, while what we would now call martial arts may have long been practised all over the world, the effective birth or baptism of martial arts *as we know them today* was a media-driven process. Let us now look at some of the key features and coordinates of this process.

## From Bruce Lee to ‘Bruce Lee’

Perhaps the first – certainly the most well-known – filmic instance of someone using the term ‘martial arts’ occurs in 1972’s *The Way of the Dragon*, when the dubbed voice of Lee’s character Tang Lung utters the immortal line ‘and every day I practice martial arts’. The following year, in 1973’s global blockbuster *Enter the Dragon*, the English secret service character, Mr Braithwaite, raises the subject of ‘a tournament of martial arts’. Bruce Lee himself does not use the term. It is only Braithwaite (plus, in one cut of the film, Lee’s Shaolin monk teacher) who speaks of ‘martial arts’. In other words, it is not simply Bruce Lee, but the textual apparatus around him that is at the forefront of the emergence of the term.

Indeed, it is the media apparatus that is doing the heavy lifting. As we have already seen, it is the film dialogue, often of other characters, that puts the term out there. But in the case of *Enter the Dragon*, it is perhaps even more significant that the original movie posters trumpeted it as ‘the first American produced martial arts spectacular’. Given that movie posters and trailers are aspects of films that reach far more people than ever go on to see the films themselves, it might be said that the poster for *Enter the Dragon* is what first publicised the term ‘martial arts’ most widely.

The media apparatus is what powerfully puts the term ‘martial arts’ into wider circulation and public consciousness. The point is that we must remain aware that we are never dealing simply with Bruce Lee *the man*, but always ‘Bruce Lee’ *the textual construct*, the figure in the carpet of citations that make up ‘his’ films, the allusions in other cultural texts produced in the wake of these feature films, and the ripples of his appearance, shadows, spectres and evocations across myriad media contexts – TV programmes, adverts, music videos and so on – ever since.

In what follows, my aim is to explore the features of this media legacy, exploring the main ways that ‘Bruce Lee’ continues to appear in scattered textual reiterations, in whole or in part, literally or as an allusion, in isolation or as part of a cluster of other kinds of imagery; and hence to perceive more clearly the ways in which his image continues to structure and influence the ongoing aesthetics and understandings of ‘martial arts’ as a discursive entity in contemporary international media culture. Bruce Lee’s lasting media legacy is to have defined an entire seam – arguably, the major seam – of martial arts aesthetics. This aesthetic endures to this day. The images provided by Bruce Lee continue to constitute some of the most internationally recognisable elements and aspects of what we might term ‘key visuals’ (Tausch, 2018a, 2019)<sup>1</sup> of martial arts.

## Bruce Lee monthly

In the world of specialist martial arts publications, Bruce Lee was already starting to make a big name for himself by 1971, particularly with his authorship of the controversial article ‘Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate’ (Inosanto, 1994; Lee, 1971). A decade earlier, he had self-published a pioneering early book on aspects of Chinese martial arts, entitled *Chinese Gung Fu: The Philosophical Art of Self-Defense*. This would go on to be republished by Ohara Publications and Black Belt Books in 1987 and marketed as ‘an exact facsimile edition of Bruce Lee’s original book, a rare collector’s item first published in 1963. Similarly, a 1972 book, *Wing Chun Kung-fu*, is today marketed as being *edited* by Bruce Lee and *featuring* his student Ted Wong. This introduces Wing Chun ‘fundamentals’, such as the *sil lim tao* form, ‘immovable-elbow’ and ‘centreline’ theories, *chi sao* (sticky hands), trapping and more. To this day, it is emblazoned with such claims as *Wing Chun Kung-fu* continues to set the standard for martial arts instructional books, and it has become the perennial study guide for kung fu enthusiasts of all skill levels’. However, the retroactive publication of early ‘Bruce Lee’ words and works was yet to take place in the very early 1970s, during which time Lee was still building his reputation.

In large part thanks to the success of Bruce Lee films, 1973 is widely regarded as being pivotal for the explosion of martial arts into popular cultural consciousness (Brown, 1997). By 1973, the West was increasingly aware of evermore successful English-language releases of the *wuxia* and kung fu films made by Bruce Lee and the Shaw Brothers. Most significantly, of course, 1973 saw not only the release of the blockbuster *Enter the Dragon* but also the untimely and inexplicable death of its star, Bruce Lee.

In the wake of this, 1974 saw the appearance of a prominent new martial arts publication in the United Kingdom, one that would become the bedrock of an entire publishing empire. This was *Kung-Fu Monthly*, a UK magazine devised by Felix Dennis, who founded Dennis Publishing on the strength of it. All 79 issues of *Kung-Fu Monthly* feature Bruce Lee on the cover, and the magazine catapulted Dennis into the world of wealth. Interestingly, despite growing very rich very quickly by pioneering British publication in the area of martial arts, Dennis remained convinced that martial arts magazines were merely a passing fad that had no financial longevity. Hence, he quickly diversified into different fields (Rowe, 2014).

Several other long-running magazines also appeared in the United Kingdom in 1974, along with many appearing in the United States, such as the British publication *Combat* and the American magazine *Action Black Belt*. In the same year, *Dragon*, a British poster magazine that was more of a gossip magazine than one focusing on techniques or styles appeared. So did the perhaps overhonestly titled *Exciting Cinema Kung Fu* magazine. Martial arts even broke into the world of pop music in 1974, with the song 'Kung Fu Fighting' – a hit that topped charts in multiple countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia, and about which there is a great deal that remains to be said (Brown, 1997).

I argue at length elsewhere<sup>2</sup> that, despite its apparent simplicity, the song 'Kung Fu Fighting' is actually a significant and complex text – and one that directly references Bruce Lee's first martial arts film, *The Big Boss* (1971), in its lyrics. While there is not time for a full analysis and discussion here, a few observations should indicate something of its often-overlooked or even dismissed media and cultural importance. Produced in the United Kingdom, with lyrics by the Jamaican-born Carl Douglas and music by the Indian Biddu, the song is organised by incredibly catchy musical and lyrical refrains, such as the 'oriental riff' (Nilsson, n.d.) and the phrase 'everybody was kung fu fighting'. These have combined to produce some of the most familiar and recognisable fragments of martial arts culture circulating in the anglophone world (and beyond). Indeed, along with a very small selection of other aural and visual signifiers – such as the mythological image of the black belt, Bruce Lee's signature sounds (his caws and screams), and images of ninjas, Shaolin monks and black or white uniforms – the phrase 'everybody was kung fu fighting' condenses, captures, symbolises, conveys and communicates a great deal about martial arts in and as a part of culture.

Undoubtedly, a large part of the success of this song relates to the fact that it appeared at just the right time (with 'expert timing', one might say), immediately in the wake of Bruce Lee's blockbuster films and on the crest of the wave of the kung fu craze. Moreover, not only was it of that moment itself, it was also *descriptive of its own cultural moment*, in a way passing a kind of meta-comment on it: 'Everybody was kung fu fighting'. It also touched on and activated certain fantasies, from orientalist fantasies about Asian martial arts experts to the fantasy of invincibility and the desire to become invincible, just like the fantasised kung fu experts of the song. But, crucially, it also emerged *in just the right way*: expressed through the then-radical new sound of disco. (This new sound, however, was destined to become, over time, the very paragon of mainstream easy-listening.)

In film, 1974 was also the year of the Sonny Chiba hit, *The Street Fighter*, a film that is in one sense the Japanese filmic response to Bruce Lee and a film that would come to be a cult classic in the West, particularly when Video Home System (VHS) video players arrived at the end of the 1970s. Similarly, off the back of *Enter the Dragon*, the 'blaxploitation' film *Black Belt Jones* also appeared, starring Bruce Lee's co-star Jim Kelly as the eponymous black belt.

1974 is also the first year in which multiple British national newspapers print articles and other items about martial arts. For instance, one of the United Kingdom's largest circulation newspapers, the *Daily Mail*, publishes stories about the kung fu craze inspired by Bruce Lee, about how karate is 'a fight with yourself', about con-men who have stolen money by having people sign up for non-existent martial arts courses, about aikido and about the love triangle of Elvis Presley, his former wife, Priscilla and his former karate instructor, Mike Stone. *The Daily Mirror* reports on the success of Carl Douglas's hit 'Kung Fu Fighting' and discusses the rise in the popularity of martial arts in the wake of Bruce Lee films. Even *The Times* begins to review martial arts books during this year, all of which registers the emergence of this new discursive entity within mainstream anglophone cultural contexts.

## Brucesploitation

The first of what are now called 'Brucesploitation' films began to appear in 1975. The term 'Brucesploitation' refers to films either designed to trick viewers into believing they might be about to see another Bruce Lee film, or films involving Bruce Lee lookalikes or actors with similar sounding names. Also included in this category are films involving stories about Bruce Lee, sometimes combined with footage from his public life or fragments of his earlier films or television appearances (Hunt, 2003). Appropriately enough, this early example from 1975 itself had different titles in different contexts, being known variously as *Goodbye Bruce Lee: His Last Game of Death*, *New Game of Death* and/or *Legend of Bruce Lee*.

The 'Brucesploitation' trend continued through 1976, with film titles such as *Exit the Dragon*, *Enter the Tiger*, *Bruce Lee Fights Back From the Grave* and *New Fist of Fury*. New Bruce Lee-centric magazines continued to appear, such as *Bruce Lee* magazine. Meanwhile, *The Daily Mirror* published cartoons based on puns about martial arts and film titles (Q: 'Which Eastern arts are apes expert at?', A: 'Kong Fu'), and *The Times* was able to argue that economics 'can be viewed as a martial art'. By this stage, therefore, it is clear that the term 'martial art' or 'martial arts' is *widespread and familiar*. It is a term that can be used in puns, as forms of simile, metaphor and comparison, in all manner of cultural context.

Brucesploitation films of 1977 include *The Dragon Lives Again*, and a version of Brucesploitation even moves into the world of book publication. For example, this year gives us two 'Bruce Lee' books: *Bruce Lee's Fighting Method: Skill in Techniques*, and *Bruce Lee's Fighting Method: Advanced Techniques*, both from Black Belt Communications. These books are credited as being 'co-authored' by Bruce Lee, although, like almost every one of his 'authored' publications, the texts were actually cobbled together posthumously.

The status of Bruce Lee as a popular cultural icon is also clearly registered in film through the mid-1970s. For instance, in Horace Ové's 1975 social realist film *Pressure*, which is all about life in West London, a poster of Bruce Lee on a bedroom wall features prominently in ways that signal the lead character's desires for potency (Bowman, 2013, p. 43). Similarly but differently, in 1977's *Saturday Night Fever*, we see a Bruce Lee poster in Tony Manero's (John Travolta) bedroom, an occurrence that signals Lee's popular cultural significance (Nitta, 2010, p. 380).

Bruce Lee imagery recurs frequently in media such as music videos, too. One of the earliest examples is the music video for 'Ant Rap' by the eccentric British band Adam and the Ants. 'Ant Rap' is not only a self-consciously hybrid or postmodern text, it is also one of the earliest well-known examples of a white artist attempting to broach the genre of rap – it was released

the year after Debbie Harry rapped in Blondie's hit 'Rapture'. Lyrically, the topic of the song is eccentric: 'Ant Rap' covers all manner of subjects, from the terms of the French Revolution to Adam Ant's dancing abilities, drink, drugs, the north and the south, and a range of other apparently randomly assembled themes. This randomness is reflected in the video, which has a loose hero-rescues-damsel-in-distress narrative but along the way involves a collage or bricolage of disparate popular cultural characters. Martial arts culture appears in the form of Adam Ant dressed and made up as Bruce Lee's 'Mr Li' from *Enter the Dragon* – replete with slashes to his skin made by the antihero Han's bladed hand. Li/Ant bursts through an internal door in a castle and despatches several mafia characters, using techniques and poses drawn directly from the film. In fact, it deserves to be said that, as awkward as many of the 'cultural appropriations' or vignettes in the video may be, Adam Ant's performance as Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon* is not at all bad.

However, it must be acknowledged that it is deliberately *comic*, in that it is executed as if the entrance of Bruce Lee's Mr Li into a castle to despatch gun-wielding mafia henchmen constitutes an unexpected and hence *funny* anachronism.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the decision to include the Bruce Lee of *Enter the Dragon* within this bricolage of a text clearly indicates the centrality and recognisability of Lee and this film within popular culture at that time. It is perhaps unfortunate that this particular entrance of the dragon is marked as *comic*. As I have argued elsewhere (Bowman, 2017), the impending comic future status of filmic Asian martial arts in mainstream Western visual culture was already being mapped out in the early 1970s, via such cartoons as Hong Kong Phooey (1974). This music video gives us an early dose of the widespread and frequent comic treatment of martial arts that was to come.

A different seam of the 'comedy' to be derived from Lee-related imagery is mined in a (soon-banned) 1983 advert for Walker's crisps. In this advert, a young Chinese man, evidently freshly arrived in London, attempts to buy Walker's crisps from a street vendor. Unfortunately, the vendor loves this brand of crisps so much that he tries to sell him another brand instead, a refusal that eventually provokes the young man's rage: he ultimately explodes in anger, performing dramatic kicking and striking moves and screaming like Bruce Lee. This advert was banned on the basis of its potential racist interpretations, although its declared intent was humour – a humorous transformation of a kung fu film theme, the most obvious cinematic antecedent of which is the scene in *Fist of Fury* in which Bruce Lee's Chen Zhen destroys the racist sign banning Chinese entrance to a park.

By the mid-1980s, Bruce Lee was coming back from the grave in many senses. The big martial arts film of 1986 was *No Retreat, No Surrender*, an American film featuring Jean-Claude Van Damme, in which the ghost of Bruce Lee returns to coach a teenager (Morris, 2001). In a more extended textual or narrative sense, Lee's ghost also haunts the influential 1988 martial arts film that made Van Damme a star, *Bloodsport*, which is arguably in many respects a remake of Bruce Lee's 1973 hit, *Enter the Dragon*. In addition to revolving around a martial arts tournament, *Bloodsport* repeats lines of dialogue taken directly from *Enter the Dragon* and even features one of its original bad guys. Interestingly, *Bloodsport* is not merely haunted by the ghost of 'martial arts past', so to speak; it also presages the reality of martial arts future: its depiction of an underground no-holds-barred tournament in Hong Kong presages the emergence of the mainstream incarnations of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), most prominently the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), which first appeared on TV screens and VHS videos in 1993.



## Visual dominance

By the end of the 1980s, Bruce Lee had attained a kind of ‘everywhere and nowhere’ status of the kind that a certain genre of poststructuralist theory would once have called ‘hauntological’ (Derrida, 1994), or that a certain impulse in film theory would once have called an ‘absent presence’ – that is, so much a part of the ‘taken as given’ conceptual, aesthetic, epistemological and ‘ontological’ bedrock of martial arts (in) culture that ‘he’ can be regarded as present even when absent.

A 1989 advert for a type of butter called St. Ivel Gold illustrates one of the forms that this took. The camera in the advert focuses primarily on a martial artist’s hands as he prepares to ‘karate chop’ a short plank of wood. First, we see a close-up of the lid of the product, St. Ivel Gold, itself. Then, we see a martial artist, in white karate gi with black belt, his face silhouetted, as he takes a step towards two tables. A short plank of wood spans the gap between the tables. Then, the camera moves to a shot from directly above the plank. The board is placed across the space between two table-tops, each of which is white with a regular thin-lined black grid-like pattern, all of which creates a strong association with traditional Japanese sliding doors (*shōji*). All the while, we hear generic oriental-sounding music.

As the narrator begins speaking, we see the martial artist’s hands, palms and fingers come together (akin to the Christian hand position for praying, or, more obviously, the hand position adopted for bowing in some East Asian cultures). In this position, the hands move to the centre of the wood. The narrator runs through a list of dairy products that we are told contain 80% fat. Each time the phrase ‘80% fat’ is repeated, the two hands separate in the middle of the plank and move to each end of the wood, as if ritualistically measuring it out. However, when the narrator turns to the subject of St. Ivel Gold, we learn that it has *half* the fat of those other products, whereupon the martial artist’s hand smashes down and chops the plank in *half*.

Given so much overwhelmingly Japanese imagery, it may come as some surprise when we get a glimpse of the martial artist’s face just before he breaks the board: we see that he is a Bruce Lee lookalike.

This kind of cultural conflation between Japanese and Chinese is exactly the kind of thing that animates anti-orientalist critics, as it is taken as evidence of a complete disregard for cultural specificity. Of course, one possible response would be to say that it is equally racist to assume that an ethnically Chinese man should not practise karate. But all such debates miss the point here. For, the key point is that the advert as a whole is playing with the *most recognisable tokens* of martial arts imagery – what Tim Trausch calls the discourse’s ‘key visuals’ (Trausch, 2018a). The advert may not care about their cultural specificity that is true. But the fact that the ingredients or contents of the ‘martial-artsy-ness’ paradigm – or the semiotic lexicon of this advert – combines so many exclusively *Japanese* elements plus a *Bruce Lee* lookalike is telling: it suggests that the most commonly recognisable and immediately intelligible signifiers of martial arts in Britain at that time were, on the one hand, those that come from the well-established and already-familiar Japanese martial arts, such as judo and karate, and, on the other hand, Bruce Lee, the most recognisable *face* of and for ‘all of that kind of thing’.

A similar carefree or careless (ab)use of Bruce Lee-related martial arts imagery can be seen in the video for a song on the now-celebrated debut album of the British band Ash (an album called 1977). This is the 1995 video for the song ‘Kung Fu’. It involves all kinds of intertextual jumbles and cultural confusion – or indeed (potentially offensive) cultural irreverence. For instance, a key refrain in the song is the confused and confusing line, ‘Oh Daniel-San, made in Taiwan, come on Jackie Chan’. There are other equally jumbled references in the song, such as references to Bruce

Lee grouped with Jackie Chan, followed (every time) by the line, 'I think it's strange, he's friends with Fu Manchu'.

This kind of jumbled association of elements is not purely random, but is rather *culturally over-determined*, as it lays bare the key items that anyone, no matter how ill-informed, might be aware of in relation to East Asian martial arts culture. In other words, these items could easily stand as part of an exemplary list of the kind of things that a minimally culturally literate British person of the era could not fail to 'know about' to do with Asia and Asian martial arts. Given this, some may rightly feel inclined to take offence on behalf of one or another or all of the cultural groups, locations, texts and references that are jumbled up into these lyrics. The irony here, however, is that Jackie Chan himself reputedly liked the song, and it features over the end credits of his 1995 film, *Rumble in the Bronx*.

As for the video itself: when the guitar-driven 'indie' music begins, the video alternates between predictable indie-video footage of a live concert (replete with bouncing audience members, stage diving and crowd surfing), alongside shots of two bare-chested white pugilists, intercut with flashes of an Asian woman's face and arms. The woman is always filmed face-on, and always in relative close-up – except for one scene in which she walks down a city street flanked by members of the band. The martial arts depicted in the video bear more of the hallmarks of generic kickboxing than of kung fu in particular, despite being intercut with pseudo-kung fu poses struck by the two white pugilists and the Asian woman, and despite the occasional shot which shows us that the white pugilists' torsos are daubed in the instantly recognisable quadruple slashes that graced Bruce Lee's body at the end of *Enter the Dragon*.

Once again, this slapdash and slipshod hybrid text registers the enduring centrality of imagery derived from Bruce Lee films in the visual textual lexicon of martial arts in media culture. This imagery often takes the forms of fragments or reiterated meme-like references, such as the quadruple slashes, nunchakus, screams, cries, *kiais* and caws of Bruce Lee.

It deserves mention that academic attention has often been given exclusively to full-fledged Bruce Lee 'clones', rather than fragments and part-objects such as these. Indeed, the idea of such 'clones' has primarily been used in relation to martial arts *films* of the 1970s. But Bruce Lee lookalikes, along with bits and pieces of imagery that synecdochically and metonymically conjure up Bruce Lee, feature in far more diverse ways and cultural contexts than mere filmic imitations. For instance, a recent UK advert that used a Bruce Lee clone was the 2017 OVO (energy provider) advert, featuring a character they termed 'Boost Lee'. This advert featured a shoddy Bruce Lee lookalike dressed in Lee's signature yellow jump suit, advertising a new smartphone app. The advert was called 'finger of fury', as the app and the advert focus on tapping a smartphone screen with the fingers. Perhaps because the advert is so caricatural, there were complaints about it, based on the argument that it may promote stereotypes and racism. However, these complaints were not upheld by the British regulator, and the advert is still shown on British TV at the time of writing (early 2019).

Conversely, in certain other adverts, the uses of figures whose looks recall Bruce Lee in one way or another can actually be regarded as 'positive' and 'progressive' – in that they not only actively represent martial arts as 'cool' and impressive but they also eroticise their Asian male leads. In this category, a 1997 advert for Levi's 501 jeans is set in a gritty and nostalgia-inducing Hong Kong against a soundtrack that recalls early 1970s blaxploitation era funk music. The tight-white-vest-wearing lead man (Dusting Nguyen) is not *quite* a Bruce Lee lookalike, but the advert works hard to form the association through signature Bruce Lee moves and accompanying sound effects as he bests multiple opponents on his race through an urban cityscape down into a commercial laundry.

Once inside the laundry, he takes an item of clothing out of the arms of an equally attractive female laundry worker and looks at them. They are evidently his 501 jeans, which he deftly flicks out and back into his hands, turning them inside out. He hands them back to her as hordes of opponents appear outside the door. After some suggestive eye contact between the male and female leads, our hero heads back out into the melee. She gazes after him. Then, the advert fades into the logo for Levi's 501s and the words 'best washed inside out' appear.

Bruce Lee aesthetics are also eroticised in a different register in a 2006 advert for French Connection, which stages the brand's supposed eternal struggle between the imperatives of style and those of fashion. Accordingly, Fashion and Style are incarnated as female protagonists, who square off against each other and begin fighting. We first see 'Style' ripping and tearing at her own smart clothes to enable freer movement before she squares off against her as-yet-unseen opponent, striking the classic/clichéd pose of the Western boxer challenging an opponent. We then see 'Fashion' respond, exploding into an exaggerated kung fu-esque posture.

The women begin to fight, according to the conventions of the most dramatic of fight choreography approaches. We see such stock conventions as fighters kicking each other through the air, landing flat on their back and then flipping up onto their feet, and so on. Wrist locks are accompanied by the sounds of crunching and cracking joints. But, as is appropriate in an advert whose conceit is the eternal struggle between fashion and style, it alternates between *aggression* and *attraction*, *polemos* and *eros* – with much of the 'fighting' being double-coded as simultaneously violent and erotic. At one point, Fashion tears out a clump of Style's hair and then opens her fist and blows the hair out of her hand, directly referencing Bruce Lee's fight with Chuck Norris in *The Way of the Dragon*.

In 2008, another form of Bruce Lee cloning occurred in the famous case of the 'found footage' of Bruce Lee playing ping pong/table tennis dressed in the yellow jump suit that he wore in *The Game of Death*. This was circulated online, as if it were a real documentary find that 'went viral'. Of course, Bruce Lee aficionados could instantly tell that the body double was not Bruce Lee, yet many people believed (and continue to believe) that it was Bruce Lee. Computer-generated imagery (CGI) was used very impressively to introduce a computer-generated ping pong ball into the scene. The fact that the clip was branded at the end with information about Nokia should have alerted people that this was an advert, as should the existence of a 'limited edition' Nokia N96 Bruce Lee Cell Phone at the same time as its appearance. But in any case, in all of this what shines through is the aesthetic appeal of martial arts imagery and practices, as they can be transposed into different contexts. Nunchakus are not principally designed for ping pong, but this CGI depiction of precisely this usage is perhaps even more fascinating than their 'proper' deployment in Bruce Lee films such as *Fist of Fury*, *Enter the Dragon*, or of course the unfinished *The Game of Death*.

In certain ways and in certain texts, the nunchaku actually becomes one of the features associated with Bruce Lee, and *vice versa*. Bruce Lee often stands for the nunchaku and the nunchaku for Bruce Lee. This can be seen in 'JCB Song', the 2005 British pop hit by the band Nizlopi. If, as is well documented, US rap and hip-hop songs, aesthetics and culture often register 1970s martial arts in a very gritty and urban US inner-city manner (Brown, 1997; Kato, 2007; Marchetti, 2001), Nizlopi's 'JCB Song' evokes a very different memory of working-class childhood – perhaps particular to Britain (Bowman, 2008).

Specifically, in this song, the narrator sings in the first person, in character, as his 5-year-old former-self – performing the recollection of being in his father's JCB digger and reflecting on how happy he is to be with his dad and not at school where there are bullies and stern teachers. I have analysed this song at length elsewhere (Bowman, 2008, 2010) focusing on the ways it explores

how images from film and popular culture colonise children's imaginations and organise their thinking and fantasy. The specific martial arts imagery included in the lyrics are nunchakus and Bruce Lee, and the video is an (award-winning) animation that reflects the way children draw pictures of themselves and their film and TV heroes. But in this context what most deserves comment is the way that, lyrically, the song's 5-year-old narrator begins from fantasising about his dad *having* a pair of Bruce Lee's nunchakus into the fantasy scenario at the end in which the narrator chants jubilantly that his dad *is* Bruce Lee. The transitional object was the nunchaku. But the nunchaku is always also Bruce Lee.

## Conclusion

If Bruce Lee's body, identity, features, movements, noises and bleeding wounds double, divide and expand, through condensation and displacement, beyond the realms of martial arts 'proper' in different ways across the texts of media culture, perhaps nowhere is this better seen than in a banned 2012 advert. Made for the European Commission in support of The European Union, the advert shows a white woman wearing the iconic Bruce Lee and/or Uma Thurman – *The Game of Death* and/or *Kill Bill* yellow suit entering into a large space akin to an aircraft hangar, respectively. Clearly, this character is *not* Bruce Lee, but she is so constituted by a discourse *set up by* Bruce Lee imagery within martial arts film and visual culture that the reference is very close to the surface.

Soon, other characters appear on the scene – a sword-wielding Turk, a combative Afro-Brazilian capoeirista, a kung fu-fighting Chinese man, and so on. All of these characters surround our blonde white woman, and she becomes hugely outnumbered, presumably soon to be overpowered. However, affecting a meditative pose, our heroine starts to replicate: exact clones of her begin to appear, and as they grow in number they surround and outnumber her antagonists. In the end, so many female clones form a circle around the hostile foreign threats that they realise they cannot win and stand down from their aggression. At this point, the scene melts into a picture in which the women become stars on the circle on the European flag and the advert tells us that we are 'stronger together'.

This advert was banned because it depicted so many regional ethnicities in stereotypical and aggressive ways. (Such 'othering' – collapsing national, cultural or economic difference into an ethnic stereotype – is explicitly frowned upon by liberal discourse.) But what is perhaps even more interesting about it is the way that an Asian-American Bruce Lee from *The Game of Death* and an Anglo-Saxon-American Uma Thurman from *Kill Bill* can so easily and transparently stand for 'Europe' – for the homely, the natural, the normal, the 'here and now' the 'we' of Europe. As Sylvia Huey Chong (2012) has argued persuasively, the popularity of Bruce Lee in the West was always very far from an indication of the 'acceptance' of Asian identities in America: it was more an incorporation of what she calls 'the oriental obscene' into American identity, in a way that made Bruce Lee effectively white.


However, at the same time as Bruce Lee became so naturalised as to stand as an unproblematic signifier of 'Europe', the following year, 2013, saw a digitally reanimated reincarnation of a mature, well-aged Bruce Lee, speaking Mandarin and advertising Johnny Walker whisky to mainland Chinese viewers. The CGI-produced advert took images of 'water' and 'wisdom' from Bruce Lee's martial artsy lexicon in ways that attempted to displace these values onto the product in question (whisky), while the language used recast Lee as a mainlander of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

When appraised in light of the various other mainland Chinese media projects featuring Bruce Lee, it becomes possible to regard this occurrence as another instance of the relatively recent PRC attempt to 're-appropriate' Bruce Lee as (if) fully Chinese. From this point, the obvious counter-move is to reflect, by contrast, on Bruce Lee's status in the West, or as something decidedly 'Western'. And the dialectical synthesis is one in which 'Bruce Lee' comes to hold the status of something or somewhere like Hong Kong – that is 'both/and' and/or 'neither/nor' one thing (or place) and/or the other. Such debates are well-worn and generally saturated in pre-critical nationalist impulses. Rather than repeat them here, I have preferred instead to emphasise that as a spectacular media-event, Bruce Lee provided epochal textual material, images that immediately and enduringly structured and continue to structure 'martial arts', semantically, semiotically and aesthetically – not only in national, international and global media but also in global popular cultural consciousness, as well as in the hearts, minds and lived bodily practices of countless 'martial artists' – martial artists that these images in large part actually produced.

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### ORCID iD

Paul Bowman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9311-2391>

### Notes

1. Bruce Lee iconography is not the only visual lexicon of martial arts images and imagery. There are other seams available, some of which have no connection to Bruce Lee – such as spies, secret agents, ninjas, ronin, soldiers, 'knight errant' *wuxia* figures, white gi-wearing black belts, kendo practitioners and samurai. However, none have been more influential than Bruce Lee.
2. The Invention of Martial Arts, forthcoming.
3. This is so even though this is exactly what happens in *The Way of the Dragon*, in which Lee's country-bumpkin character Tang Lung goes to Rome to fight the mafia and save a Chinese restaurant.

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### Author biography

**Paul Bowman** is Professor of Cultural Studies at Cardiff University, UK. He is author and editor of many and various works of cultural studies and cultural theory, but most relevant in this context, he is author of *Theorizing Bruce Lee* (2010), *Beyond Bruce Lee* (2013), *Reading Rey Chow* (2013), *Martial Arts Studies* (2015) and *Mythologies of Martial Arts* (2017). His most recent book is *Deconstructing Martial Arts* (2019), which is free to download from Cardiff University Press.